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As we prepare to observe Memorial Day this Monday, we reflect on how Americans in every generation have made the ultimate sacrifice to defend our liberties and keep us safe and secure. Indeed, those who have given their lives for our country often did so while combating the most lethal enemies of freedom. From Nazis in Europe to al Qaeda around the world, America's foes often have been the world's most tyrannical violators of fundamental human rights.

Among these rights is the freedom of religion or belief, the right of people everywhere to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience leads, peacefully practice their beliefs, and express them openly without fear or intimidation.

Today, this pivotal right is being denied across much of the world. According to the

recently-released annual report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which I serve, too many governments continue to perpetrate or tolerate serious religious freedom violations.

These governments range from China, the world's most populous country, to Iran, where "warring against God" remains a capital offense, to a number of Central Asian regimes whose Muslim populations face repression that mimics some of the old Soviet empire's most disturbing abuses. From prolonged detention to torture and even murder, violations of this precious right sadly span much of the globe.

Since its creation in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, our commission has been monitoring violators and recommending to the President, Secretary of State and Congress policies that will advance freedom. Our annual report highlights religious freedom violators, including the worst abusers, whom we recommend that the Secretary of State designate "countries of particular concern" or CPCs.

By creating both an independent commission and a separate office within the State Department, the 1998 act has put the United States squarely on the side of the freedom for which so many died. By supporting the freedom of religion or belief, we embrace their cause.

A growing number of studies show that in taking this stand, we also advance peace and security. Research shows that countries that honor freedom of religion are more peaceful,

prosperous, and stable than those that do not. Nations that fail to respect basic rights, including religious freedom, often are plagued by insecurity and instability, wracked by war and poverty, and torn apart by violent radical movements and activities, including terrorism.

In other words, by standing for human dignity and worth, we can make the world safer not just for freedom, but through freedom. When we make freedom the goal, we advance other aims essential to the well-being of nations, including our own.

To that end, we offer a number of key recommendations to our government.

First, the White House should issue a national security strategy that elevates religious freedom to a top priority.

Second, the current session of Congress should hold hearings and embrace legislation that supports such freedom and reflects its critical importance to national security and global stability.

Third, our State Department should act annually and promptly to designate "Countries of Particular Concern" so that nations that torment their own people are put on notice of the need for fundamental change. The added attention will press these and other nations to embrace reforms that protect liberty.

Making religious freedom an integral part of U.S. foreign policy can be a game-changer for this nation and the world and a worthy tribute to the fallen whom we remember on Memorial Day.

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